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# **‘A nation of town criers’: civic publicity and historical pageantry in inter-war Britain**

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**ABSTRACT:** Historical pageantry emerged in 1905 as the brainchild of the theatrical impresario Louis Napoleon Parker. Large casts of volunteers re-enacted successive scenes of local history, as crowds of thousands watched on, in large outdoor arenas. As the press put it, Britain had caught ‘pageant fever’. Towards the end of the 1920s, there was another outburst of historical pageantry. Yet, in contrast to the Edwardian period, when pageants took place in small towns, this revival was particularly vibrant in large industrial towns and cities. This article traces the popularity of urban pageantry to an inter-war ‘civic publicity’ movement. In doing so, it reassesses questions of local cultural decline; the role of local government; and the relationship of civic responsibility to popular theatre.

Historical pageantry emerged in Britain, on a grand scale, in the Edwardian period. Its defining characteristic was the theatrical performance of a chronological series of distinct episodes, usually beginning with the Roman occupation of Britain and ending before the eighteenth century – often with Queen Elizabeth I and a snapshot of a utopian ‘Merrie England’.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds and even thousands of amateur volunteers, from all levels of society, took part – as performers, costume- and prop-makers and organizers – and millions more watched from specially made grandstands.<sup>2</sup> Louis Napoleon Parker, a composer and theatre

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<sup>1</sup> For the pervasiveness of ‘Merrie England’ ideas, see R. Judge, ‘May Day and Merrie England’, *Folklore*, 102 (1991), 131–48.

<sup>2</sup> For the Edwardian period particularly, see A. Yoshino, *Pageant Fever: Local History and Consumerism in Edwardian England* (Tokyo, 2011); and P. Readman, ‘The place of the past in English culture’, *Past and Present*, 186 (2005), 147–99.

impresario, could rightly claim to be the first pageant-master. Formerly a music teacher at Sherborne School in Dorset, he was invited back in 1905 by a former pupil to put on a play commemorating the 1,200th anniversary of the town's founding by St Aldhelm.<sup>3</sup> Parker, a bombastic and well-educated character of English, American and French heritage, had travelled extensively. He was knowledgeable about a wide variety of English traditions, from Shakespeare and medieval mystery plays to the Morris revival, and others from further afield too, such as Wagnerian opera, and the passion play of Oberammergau.<sup>4</sup> Drawing on these influences, he recruited 800 local performers for a successful extravaganza seen by 30,000 people – impressive considering Sherborne was a town of around only 6,000 inhabitants. Sherborne had 'invented' a new 'tradition', and was quickly emulated by other places – at home and abroad – eager to exploit the financial and civic benefits of 'pageant fever'.<sup>5</sup>

After a brief lull, caused mainly by the interruption of World War I, pageantry again became a familiar part of the British cultural landscape. In May 1930, in the midst of the Great Depression, the *Times* reported, without a hint of surprise, that eight large historical pageants had been announced in a matter of days.<sup>6</sup> Yet the historical pageant had grown from its Edwardian roots. Despite the frequent declaration before 1914 that all of Britain had acquired a strange disease dubbed 'pageantitis', the movement was fairly geographically limited, concentrated mostly in southern rural counties such as Dorset, Somerset, Hertfordshire and Suffolk.<sup>7</sup> Pageants had taken place in small to medium-sized towns; of the top 20 cities by population size, only London and Liverpool had staged a major pageant before 1914.<sup>8</sup> When pageantry was revived in the inter-war period, it was adapted in a variety of ways. In 1919, there were Peace Pageants, commemorating Peace Day, which portrayed scenes

<sup>3</sup> For a contemporary description, see C.P. Goodden, *The Story of the Sherborne Pageant* (Sherborne, 1906).

<sup>4</sup> For Parker's influences, see M. Dobson, *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 2011), 168–9; Goodden, *The Story of the Sherborne Pageant*, 11; and R. Withington, *English Pageantry: An Historical Outline* (Cambridge, 1920).

<sup>5</sup> As Mick Wallis has argued, historical pageantry is an example of Hobsbawm's theory of 'invented traditions': the use of new customs, that appear to be old, in order to justify the essential rightness of their content. M. Wallis, 'The Popular Front pageant: its emergence and decline', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 11 (1996), 20. See E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983). For pageants outside of Britain, see D. Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (London, 1990); H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto, 1999); and J.F. Dean, *All Dressed Up: Modern Irish Historical Pageantry* (Syracuse, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> 'Historical pageants', *Times*, 17 May 1930, 13.

<sup>7</sup> A notable exception to this southern England focus was the enormous *National Pageant of Wales* (Cardiff, 1909), expertly analysed in H.T. Edwards, *The National Pageant of Wales* (Llandysul, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> According to '1921 Census of England and Wales, General Report with Appendices, Table 13: POPULATION, 1901–21', *Vision of Britain*. Accessed online 7 Jul. 2015 at [www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table\\_page.jsp?tab\\_id=EW1921GEN\\_M13](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table_page.jsp?tab_id=EW1921GEN_M13).

from the war.<sup>9</sup> Pageants depicting working-class history from a more political angle, mostly eschewing the ecclesiastical and royal focus of Edwardian pageants, were organized by groups such as the Co-Operative Society and the Communist Party of Great Britain.<sup>10</sup> There was also a rural revival of Parker's style of pageantry, spearheaded by Mary Kelly, founder of the Village Drama Society.<sup>11</sup> By the 1930s, historical pageants were a significant sub-genre of literary culture, and featured as 'acceptable versions of national art' in the work of modernist authors such as T.S. Eliot, E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf.<sup>12</sup> But such evolutions, though important in their own right, were dwarfed in terms of popularity by the civic pageants that became common in large industrialized cities. These are the least studied by historians, with some questioning the extent of inter-war pageantry at all; Megan Lau, for example, wrote in 2011 that the 'craze for pageantry . . . largely abated in the post-war years'.<sup>13</sup> Those historians who have looked at city pageants have tended towards isolated case-studies rather than acknowledging a specific and widespread shift to urban pageantry.<sup>14</sup> Yet, by 1939, 14 of the top 20 English cities had staged at least one historical pageant. Northern and Midlands manufacturing cities, such as Manchester, Bradford, Nottingham and Leicester, emerged as a new and appreciative home for historical pageantry.

This article explains how historical pageants became such an important part of the economic and social culture of inter-war industrial cities. Certainly, there was a commercial angle to pageants from the beginning of the movement, as small historic towns aimed to stimulate a growing market for tourism.<sup>15</sup> But, in contrast, inter-war urban pageants were reconstructed as a method of stimulating the very economic basis of cities – and those that were hardest hit by the Depression, especially. As the first section demonstrates, this shift can be traced back to the

<sup>9</sup> See A. Bartie, L. Fleming, M. Freeman, T. Hulme and P. Readman, "'And those who live, how shall I tell their fame?'" Historical pageants, collective remembrance and the First World War, 1919–1939', *Historical Research* (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> See the work of Wallis, such as 'Pageantry and the Popular Front: ideological production in the 1930s', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 38 (1994), 132–56. The League of Nations Union also utilized pageantry – see H. McCarthy, 'The League of Nations, public ritual and national identity in Britain c. 1919–56', *History Workshop Journal*, 70 (2010), 108–32.

<sup>11</sup> M. Wallis, 'Unlocking the secret soul: Mary Kelly, pioneer of village theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 16 (2000), 347–58.

<sup>12</sup> J.D. Esty, 'Amnesia in the fields: late modernism, late imperialism, and the English pageant-play', *ELH*, 69 (2002), 250.

<sup>13</sup> M. Lau, 'Performing history: the war-time pageants of Louis Napoleon Parker', *Modern Drama*, 54 (2011), 282. Michael Woods, too, argued that 'By 1928 the high tide of pageantitis' had 'ebbed away in the sobering aftermath of the First World War'. M. Woods, 'Performing power: local politics and the Taunton pageant of 1928', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 25 (1999), 59.

<sup>14</sup> S. Begley, 'Voluntary associations and the civic ideal in Leicester, 1870–1939', University of Leicester Ph.D. thesis, 2009, and Woods, 'Performing power'.

<sup>15</sup> Yoshino, *Pageant Fever*, 69–92. Esty has also described the movement as using 'the boosterist prose of chamber-of-commerce commerce brochures, gussied up into flowery couplets'. Esty, 'Amnesia in the fields', 248.

emergence of a 'civic publicity' movement, which aimed to boost local economies and encourage social stability. Civic publicity originated in wartime government propaganda, but was catalysed especially by the 1924 British Empire Exhibition in London. This huge event inaugurated the first Civic Weeks of Britain, which then spread rapidly across the north and Midlands. Civic Weeks were associated with entertainment, and historical pageants especially – as the second section details. Thus, as the civic publicity movement grew, so too did urban enthusiasm for pageantry. By the 1930s, a new professional class of 'urban boosters', straddling the worlds of theatre, government and business, had blossomed in response. The final section explores some of these masters and their pageants.

Exploring the shift of historical pageantry to urban locations tells us not just about the movement itself, but cities and governance as well. Press coverage eulogized pageants as the outcome of voluntary enthusiasm from local people, and described them in terms of a typical vibrant municipal and civic culture. Yet, as recently as 2015, an article in this journal concluded that 'urban boosterism' had declined in the inter-war years, due to weakened local government, middle-class withdrawal and provincial-press disinterest in urban progress and local politics.<sup>16</sup> This has been a persistent analysis of the inter-war period, best understood as an assumption derived from the historiographical linkage of nineteenth-century suburbanization to diminishing local government autonomy in the twentieth. Historians working in this vein have usefully highlighted the withdrawal of the middle classes from local government, and the decline of high-brow civic culture.<sup>17</sup> But more general civic activity was not always predetermined by these factors, and local vibrancy, especially on a more socially inclusive level, was obtained in other ways – as some urban historians are beginning to show.<sup>18</sup>

A professionalized and bureaucratic local state, supported by remnants of middle-class civic culture, showed remarkable ambition in the inter-war period.<sup>19</sup> Pageants are a testament to this spirit, and a rebuke to the notion

<sup>16</sup> A.J.H. Jackson, 'Civic identity, municipal governance and provincial newspapers: the Lincoln of Bernard Gilbert, poet, critic and "booster"', 1914', *Urban History*, 42 (2015), 129.

<sup>17</sup> J. Garrard, '1850–1914: the rule and decline of a new squirearchy?', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal concerned with British Studies*, 27 (1995), 583–621; R.J. Morris, 'Structure, culture and society in British towns', in M. Daunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. III (Cambridge, 2000); S. Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City, 1840–1914* (Manchester, 2000), 187–97; D. Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State: A History of Social Policy since the Industrial Revolution*, 4th edn (Basingstoke, 2009), 209–10; J. Davis, 'Central government and the towns', in Daunton, *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, 272.

<sup>18</sup> C. Wildman, 'Urban transformation in Liverpool and Manchester, 1918–1939', *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), 119–43; Begley, 'Voluntary associations and the civic ideal in Leicester'; T. Hulme, 'Putting the city back into citizenship: civics education and local government in Britain, 1918–45', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26 (2015), 26–51.

<sup>19</sup> Nick Hayes has even challenged the conclusion that the middle classes had left urban governance. See N. Hayes, 'Counting civil society: deconstructing elite participation in the

that inter-war urban culture had declined from a supposed Victorian heyday. Enthusiasm for economic and social boosterism grew, and historical pageants both reflected and constituted how local government and industry presented a 'vision of itself to its inhabitants and to the outside world' in response to the Depression.<sup>20</sup> As Jacquie L'Etang has argued, it was through local government in this period that public relations emerged more widely in Britain.<sup>21</sup> Understanding the success of urban pageantry thus illuminates the complex evolution, rather than decline, of the role of local government in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as the persistence and adaptability of Edwardian cultural forms to inter-war urban life.<sup>22</sup>

### The rise of civic publicity

Place promotion in the inter-war period was initially tourism orientated. Legislation in 1921 gave advertising powers to the councils of resort towns and, from 1929, the Travel Association – a government-sponsored body that promoted the UK to foreign tourists.<sup>23</sup> But, following the 1931 Local Authorities (Publicity) Act, general advertising powers were also given to non-resort places. Though only applicable to promotion abroad, this act further encouraged the more general industrial promotion that had emerged in the 1920s in response to economic instability.<sup>24</sup> *Civic Progress and Publicity*, a big-talking but short-lived magazine first published in 1931, typifies the contemporary interest in the relationship between local government and promotion. It was non-technical and targeted at local administrators who lacked the time and inclination to study 'the higher mathematics' or 'algebraical formulae' of modern planning ideas.<sup>25</sup> Its editors unashamedly informed its readers that the magazine's arrival was 'an event of national importance' since 'Never before... had the local administrator been provided with a medium for the exchange of views

provincial English city, 1900–1950', *Urban History*, 40 (2013), 287–314. See also N. Hayes and B.M. Doyle, 'Eggs, rags and whist drives: popular munificence and the development of provincial medical voluntarism between the wars', *Historical Research*, 86 (2013), 712–40.

<sup>20</sup> M. Freeman, "'Splendid display; pompous spectacle": historical pageants in twentieth-century Britain', *Social History*, 38 (2013), 427.

<sup>21</sup> J. L'Etang, *Public Relations in Britain: A History of Professional Practice in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2004), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Jay Winter has shown how, despite the rupture of World War I, there was an overlap of vocabularies and approaches between the 'traditional' and the 'modern' in the 1920s, as both artists and the public self-consciously returned to forms and themes popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was also the case with historical pageantry. J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1996), 3–4.

<sup>23</sup> S.V. Ward, 'Time and place: key themes in place promotion in the USA, Canada and Britain since 1870', in J.R. Gold and S.V. Ward (eds.), *Place Promotion: The Use of Publicity and Marketing to Sell Towns and Regions* (Chichester, 1994), 64.

<sup>24</sup> Ward, 'Time and place', 64.

<sup>25</sup> 'Oyez! Oyez!', *Civic Progress and Publicity*, 1 (1931), ii.

and ideas of Community Advertising.<sup>26</sup> At the heart of the magazine's quest was a simple question: how could Britain be turned into a 'nation of town criers'?<sup>27</sup>

*Civic Progress and Publicity* was one immediate response to the Local Authorities (Publicity) Act. But the magazine also had its impetus in developments in the previous 15 years – as the career of one of the magazine's most well-known contributors, Sir Charles Higham, illustrates. Born in England but trained in the USA, Higham was a self-made publicist and politician. He started his own advertising agency in 1906, and was appointed to the Committee on Recruiting Propaganda during World War I. Before this point, governmental advertising had been mostly limited to newspaper classified listings.<sup>28</sup> But men such as Higham, a slick and convincing salesman, quickly modernized (or more specifically Americanized) the government's approach.<sup>29</sup> Higham's impact was rewarded in 1921 with a knighthood, and he went on to become one of the most influential people in the rapidly growing advertising industry of the inter-war period.<sup>30</sup>

While working with the British government, Higham became interested in the relationship between education, advertising and municipal profit. In an article from his 1920 book, *Looking Forward: Mass Education through Publicity*, also reprinted in *Civic Progress and Publicity*, he argued that civic duty was essential for successful municipal publicity. Public spirit, he argued, was built upon love and pride of place. Making individuals work for the city boosted tourism and profit, and moulded a 'really practical civic intelligence'.<sup>31</sup> Higham's priorities reflected those of the government, who were trying to encourage enlistment, but also indicated a wider shift in attitudes towards citizenship and civic responsibility. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contemporaries from across the political and social spectrum were concerned about Britain's competitiveness on the world stage. In the same period, political enfranchisement, through acts in 1867, 1918 and 1928, created a mass electorate. Ways of promoting wide civic responsibility for the success of the nation – whether in industry, war or the local community – depended on reaching the mass society of the country.<sup>32</sup> Civic publicity took a range of guises. Documentary makers from the General Post Office Film Unit, and the National Association of

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> 'A nation of town criers', *Civic Progress and Publicity*, 1 (1932), 24–5.

<sup>28</sup> G.S. Messinger, *British Propaganda and the State in the First World War* (Manchester, 1992), 214.

<sup>29</sup> For a description of his charm, see his son's memoirs: C. Higham, *In and Out of Hollywood: A Biographer's Memoir* (New York, 2009), 6.

<sup>30</sup> 'Obituary: Sir Charles Higham development of advertising', *Times*, 27 Dec. 1938, 10; Messinger, *British Propaganda*, 219.

<sup>31</sup> 'Sir Charles Higham on community advertising', *Civic Progress and Publicity*, 1 (1931), 25.

<sup>32</sup> See Hulme, 'Putting the city back into citizenship'; S.D. Otter, "'Thinking in communities": late nineteenth-century Liberals, Idealists and the retrieval of community', *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997), 67–84; and essays in E.F. Biagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community: Liberals,*



Local Government Officers, pioneered approaches that aimed at informing locally minded citizens.<sup>33</sup> National and local government became involved in economic promotion through the Empire Marketing Board, founded in 1926, which posited imperial consumerism as good citizenship.<sup>34</sup> Political parties, too, adopted advertising techniques to capture new voters.<sup>35</sup>

A vital part of this inter-war civic promotion, and one which has not received much academic attention, were Civic Weeks – a phenomenon that combined both economic and social goals.<sup>36</sup> By 1934, at least 20 places, mostly medium to large industrial towns and cities, had staged a Civic Week. The movement originated in 1924 via the British Empire Exhibition: an attempt to promote the products of the empire by returning to the legacy of the great Victorian and Edwardian international fairs.<sup>37</sup> Next door to the Exhibition's famous Wembley stadium was the lesser-known Civic Hall, rentable as exhibition space to city councils.<sup>38</sup> As the Exhibition authorities explained, Civic Weeks would portray the civic institutions of cities both historically and from the point of view of 'modern municipal enterprise', boosting the public image of local government while also concentrating 'the attention of Dominion, colonial, and foreign buyers and visitors on the trade and manufactures' of a particular city.<sup>39</sup> Major E.A. Belcher, controller of general services to the Exhibition, travelled across Britain drumming up support for the scheme in industrial cities using the language of 'publicity' and 'progress'.<sup>40</sup> Hull, Bristol, Liverpool, Derby, Cardiff and Salford were amenable to the message, and staged exhibitions at Civic Hall during 1924, in a partnership of municipal and private enterprise.<sup>41</sup>

At first it seemed that Civic Weeks would continue into the second year of the Empire Exhibition. For Percy Harris, a Liberal Party MP, at least, the Weeks had stimulated local economies, while also creating local civic pride.<sup>42</sup> But most cities were less convinced; the only place to take another

*Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles 1865–1931* (Cambridge, 2002; orig. publ. 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Hulme, 'Putting the city back into citizenship'.

<sup>34</sup> S. Constantine, "'Bringing the Empire alive": the Empire Marketing Board and imperial propaganda, 1926–33', in J.M. MacKenzie (ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester, 1986).

<sup>35</sup> D. Jarvis, 'Mrs Maggs and Betty: the Conservative appeal to women voters in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5 (1994), 129–52; and L. Beers, 'Education or manipulation? Labour, democracy, and the popular press in interwar Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 48 (2009), 129–52.

<sup>36</sup> The only substantial analyses of Civic Weeks have been Wildman, 'Urban transformation in Liverpool and Manchester, 1918–1939', and J.F. Dean, 'Rewriting the past: historical pageantry in the Dublin Civic Weeks of 1927 and 1929', *New Hibernia Review*, 13 (2009), 20–41.

<sup>37</sup> R. Rydell, *World of Fairs: The Century-of-Progress Expositions* (Chicago, 1993), 63–7.

<sup>38</sup> 'Liverpool's Civic Week', *Manchester Guardian*, 19 Sep. 1924, 11.

<sup>39</sup> 'A "Civic Week" scheme', *Western Daily Press*, 20 Nov. 1923, 5.

<sup>40</sup> 'To boost Bristol', *Western Daily Press*, 21 Nov. 1923, 7.

<sup>41</sup> For a brief description of the Civic Weeks at Wembley, see D. Stephen, *The Empire of Progress: West Africans, Indians, and Britons at the British Empire Exhibition 1924–25* (New York, 2013), 111.

<sup>42</sup> 'London Civic Week at Wembley', *Times*, 22 Jul. 1924, 15.

stint in Civic Hall was Hull. Other local authorities were affected by the general uncertainty around the continuation of the Empire Exhibition after the effort and large financial loss it had entailed.<sup>43</sup> Municipal governments, usually fronting the cost of the Weeks, had enjoyed the attention and publicity, but struggled to justify the financial cost without a calculable reward. Relocating Civic Weeks to cities, however, made much more sense. The Liverpool Organization, formed during the Empire Exhibition, was first to take the initiative by organizing a Liverpool 'At Home' Week in 1924.<sup>44</sup> Though the number of potential customers in London during the Exhibition had far exceeded that in Liverpool, seeing products manufactured, or literally afloat in the city's port, was more striking. The suggestion of *The Times* that other big cities might follow suit was prescient.<sup>45</sup>

Manchester's Civic Week in 1926, one of the largest, serves as an example of the new civic publicity ethos. It spread over the entire city, with tours of municipal buildings and factories, a huge Textile Exhibition, and many accompanying entertainments – including a large historical pageant in Heaton Park.<sup>46</sup> Manchester's mayor argued that the Civic Week would attract attention and investment to the city's facilities for manufacturing and distribution, for both domestic and foreign markets, while also teaching local people about what municipal government did for them.<sup>47</sup> Nearly 100,000 people visited the city's institutions and municipal departments, and over 80,000 paid for admission to the Textile Exhibition at Belle Vue.<sup>48</sup> Around a million people attended some aspect of the celebrations.<sup>49</sup> The Textile Exhibition led to orders of more than £250,000 worth of goods – £7,492,500 in today's money.<sup>50</sup> Provincial newspapers suggested other cities follow Manchester to boost trade, and they did – West Bromwich (1927), Cardiff (1928), Bolton (1929), Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1929) and Glasgow (1931), to name just a few.<sup>51</sup> After initial enthusiasm for presenting a Civic Week at the British Empire Exhibition, Manchester's

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*; 'Wembley next year', *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 10 Nov. 1924, 3; 'The weather and Wembley', *Aberdeen Journal*, 14 Oct. 1924, 6; 'Push the port!', *Hull Daily Mail*, 4 Mar. 1925, 4; 'The future of Wembley', *Times*, 12 Nov. 1924, 11.

<sup>44</sup> 'Liverpool "at home"', *Hull Daily Mail*, 18 Nov. 1924, 7.

<sup>45</sup> 'Civic advertisement', *Times*, 25 Nov. 1924, 15.

<sup>46</sup> 'City's open house', *Manchester Evening News*, 7 Aug. 1926, 8.

<sup>47</sup> Manchester Local Studies Library: Miscellaneous Souvenirs of Manchester Civic Week, MSC 942.7391, 'Report of the first meeting of the Civic Week Advisory Committee', 23 Mar. 1926, 3.

<sup>48</sup> 'Civic Week's meaning to Manchester', *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Oct. 1926, 113.

<sup>49</sup> C.E. Wildman, 'The "spectacle" of interwar Manchester and Liverpool: urban fantasies, consumer cultures and gendered identities', University of Manchester Ph.D. thesis, 2007, 88.

<sup>50</sup> Figure from *Manchester Guardian Yearbook* (1927), 230. Calculated using the National Archives Currency Converter tool, National Archives. Accessed online 8 Jul. 2015 at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/disclaimer.htm>.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, 'Civic pride: what Manchester is doing this week', *Walsall Observer*, 9 Oct. 1926, 152. The following places also held Civic Weeks before 1933: East Ham, Stoke-on-Trent, Walsall, York, Islington, Liverpool, Hull, Colchester, Eastleigh.



council had actually withdrawn following internal opposition.<sup>52</sup> It is testament, then, to the unanticipated success of the Empire Exhibition, for municipalities at least, that cities such as Manchester overcame their own hostility to large-scale civic publicity. By the end of the 1920s, local governments were fully committed to 'boosterist' events such as Civic Weeks.

### Publicity and pageantry

Civic Weeks depended on popular entertainments, such as pageants, to draw visitors into a zone of consumerism and education. But pageants were also tools of industrial 'boosterism' and civic education in their own right, arguably pushing the 'community' into doing what Higham had called 'constructive work of its own'.<sup>53</sup> Connections between the Weeks and pageantry had also been formed at the Empire Exhibition, through the city of Bristol especially. Belcher, when persuading representatives from Bristol, appealed to the city's sense of imperial identity, and explained that Bristol, more than any other city, could represent the history of the empire.<sup>54</sup> Civic figures, eager to 'advertise the city', happily agreed.<sup>55</sup> The pageant which resulted had over 3,000 performers and was produced by the famous pageant-master Frank Lascelles, who was also responsible for the massive Pageant of Empire at the Exhibition. Performed at Ashton Court in Bristol for two weeks (extended from one following poor weather), to crowds of around 3,000–4,000 each time, Bristol's pageant was then transplanted to Wembley.<sup>56</sup> At the large stadium, it at first garnered only 'absurdly small audiences', but attendance picked up slightly as the run went on.<sup>57</sup> *The Times* was probably right, however, that 'there was perhaps too much ambition in expecting the vast spaces of the Stadium to be filled for a local enterprise'.<sup>58</sup> In the end, the pageant was optimistically described as a 'spectacular success' locally, but, when added to the cost of the Week at Civic Hall, it entailed a deficit of £10,000.<sup>59</sup> Despite this loss, pageants from this point onwards became much more common in cities, at first as part of the new local Civic Weeks.<sup>60</sup> Like Civic Weeks more

<sup>52</sup> 'Manchester and Wembley', *Manchester Guardian*, 14 Feb. 1924, 11; 'Manchester abandons Wembley', *Manchester Guardian*, 3 Apr. 1924, 11.

<sup>53</sup> 'Sir Charles Higham on community advertising'.

<sup>54</sup> 'To boost Bristol', 7.

<sup>55</sup> 'Progress with the pageant', *Western Daily Press*, 6 Mar. 1924, 4; 'Bristol pageant', *Western Daily Press*, 29 Jan. 1924, 5.

<sup>56</sup> 'Bristol pageant', *Western Daily Press*, 3 Jun. 1924, 5.

<sup>57</sup> 'Bristol pageant at Wembley', *Times*, 9 Jun. 1924, 8; 'Huge crowds at Wembley', *Times*, 10 Jun. 1924, 12.

<sup>58</sup> 'Crowded days at Wembley', *Times*, 29 Jul. 1924, 10.

<sup>59</sup> 'Bristol pageant deficit', *Western Daily Press*, 1 Jul. 1924, 7.

<sup>60</sup> Pageants were also part of Civic Weeks in Liverpool (1924), Carlisle (1928), Dublin (1927 and 1929) and Newcastle (1931).

generally, historical pageants had to take place in their own cities to be both profitable and popular.

Pageantry, to work as a medium for civic publicity in the social and political circumstances of the inter-war period, also had to change in several other ways. The episodic narrative now often went up to the nineteenth century or even the present, presenting urban history as a Whiggish march towards contemporary industrial and civic power. Topics also included industrial events, such as the building of railways, or the growth in specialized production. Municipal history, though evident in the Edwardian period, became even more important, showing how local autonomy was given through special charters – possibly a response to the creeping centralization of the period, as well as a genuine expression of belief in local government. At the same time, according to pageant-master Nugent Monck, 'the central theme of modern pageantry' became the depiction of the 'influence of the crowd', by which he meant 'the increasing power of the man in the street to organize his life'.<sup>61</sup> Scenes accordingly still featured the usual royal and ecclesiastical visits, but now shown from the point of view of everyday town-dwellers, who essentially narrated visits with humorous dialogue. This was a simple yet effective way of making pageants more relatable to large crowds of urban-industrial workers. For the same reason, and in contrast to Parker's verbose pageants, dialogue was simplified, and effects became more spectacular, with lighting systems, recorded amplified sound and mechanical stages. Urban pageants were also often less serious or realistic, and could include scenes such as a giant papermache dinosaur blowing smoke at cavemen at the Birmingham Pageant of 1938.<sup>62</sup> These populist developments gave the movement a new vigour, and helped pageant-masters and organizers to take advantage of the burgeoning inter-war opportunity and enthusiasm for leisure, and to compete with other forms of entertainment, such as the cinema and amusement parks, which also used popular history to pull in the crowds.<sup>63</sup>

At the same time, certain attributes of the original pageantry movement, and what those pageants had tried to say about civic life, remained attractive to inter-war civic 'boosters'. This was especially the case for those who were not just selling the industrial products of the city, but civic pride as well. A large historical spectacular enabled claims for local importance to be made on a national level. Pageants worked as a form

<sup>61</sup> N. Monck, 'English fond of pageantry', *Portsmouth Evening News*, 7 Jun. 1938, 6.

<sup>62</sup> See *Pageant of Birmingham, Aston Park 11th–16th July 1938* (Birmingham, 1938).

<sup>63</sup> Entertainments at Manchester's Belle Vue Amusement Park in the 1920s and 1930s often included historical re-enactments – usually a battle or a joust. See *From Hulme All Blessings Flow: A Collection of Manchester Memories by Harry Watkin* (Manchester, 1985), 60. For the growth of the amusement park movement more generally, see J. Kane, *The Architecture of Pleasure: British Amusement Parks 1900–1939* (Farnham, 2013). Many historians have pointed out the growth of opportunities for leisure in the period – such as D. Fowler, *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyles of Young Wage-Earners in Interwar Britain* (London, 1995).

of civic education, by persuading citizens that their modern-day city was the result of a much longer tradition of civic progress. The contemporary city was given greater power if it was shown to be the site of past events of a national importance. Indeed, though pageantry had re-emerged in a moment of high imperialism, their storylines had, for the most part, little to say about empire. They were, instead, much more wedded to ideas of the local specifically, and its role in Britain's story. For Parker, local patriotism and national patriotism were constitutive of each other.<sup>64</sup> The empire was accordingly eschewed in favour of a 'locally grounded *English* nationhood' that looked back with insular affection to the Tudor (and Shakespearean) past, and the Merrie England of Queen Elizabeth especially – a 'settled, domesticated, peaceable England'.<sup>65</sup>

At a time when cities were experiencing challenges to their prosperity and stability, a long-term notion of the civic had a lot of purchase. Historical events provided lessons for present-day problems, and a sense that contemporaries could overcome adversity in the same way as their forebears. Even for modernist writers such as Woolf, pageants could actually work as a 'valediction' and critique of modernism's 'project of representing free-floating cosmopolitan souls', by presenting national tradition and participatory drama as 'the vision of a spontaneous community'.<sup>66</sup> New social organizations, too, such as the Women's Institute, found that historical pageants were a useful vehicle for 'the dramatization of the Institute ideals'.<sup>67</sup> In the context of post-suffrage, this meant fitting women into a non-contentious active citizenship while stimulating a sense of community.<sup>68</sup> The historical pageant, then, was not just a vital weapon in the advertisers' armoury, but also a tool for those trying to shape civic identity, pride and responsibility. Yet, despite this continuation of the lofty aim of Edwardian pageantry, Parker was, overall, unimpressed by what had happened to his creation. In his 1928 autobiography, he described how 'speculators' had tried to 'commercialise

<sup>64</sup> L.N. Parker, 'Historical pageants', *Journal of the Society of Arts* (1905), 142.

<sup>65</sup> Readman, 'The place of the past', 186–7. It should be acknowledged, however, that the story is more complicated for Scottish and Welsh pageants, which often affirmed the importance of individuality and their own artistic culture and history, but within a framework of national British history. See, as an example for Wales, Edwards, *The National Pageant of Wales*. For Scotland, see L. Fleming, 'The pageant of Ayrshire 1934', *The Redress of the Past: Historical Pageants in Britain, 1905–2016* (2014). Accessed online 12 Oct. 2015 at <http://historicalpageants.ac.uk/featured-pageants/pageant-ayrshire-1934/>.

<sup>66</sup> Esty, 'Amnesia in the fields', 269–70.

<sup>67</sup> In reference to the Dorset Pageant (1929), produced by the Dorset Federation of Women's Institutes. See 'Pageant of Dorset history', *Bridport News*, 26 Jul. 1929, 4; and *The Dorset Pageant Book of Words and Programme* (Dorchester, 1929).

<sup>68</sup> See M. Andrews, "'For home and country": feminism and Englishness in the Women's Institute Movement, 1930–1960', in A. Beach and R. Weight (eds.), *The Right to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930–1960* (London, 1998); M. Andrews, *The Acceptable Face of Feminism: The Women's Institute as a Social Movement* (London, 1997); C. Beaumont, 'Citizens not feminists: the boundary negotiated between citizenship and feminism by mainstream women's organisations in England, 1928–39', *Women's History Review*, 9 (2000), 411–29.

pageants' as 'advertising crept in', and how pageants 'sacrificed most of the attributes which should characterise them'.<sup>69</sup> Urban pageantry thus depended on a new breed of urban pageant-master: less obsessed with historical detail and dialogue, and more willing to embrace modern and industrial narratives of history.

### The 'urban-booster of Ayrshire', and the 'man who staged the city'

Urban pageant-masters took two forms. First, ambitious and resourceful newcomers who exploited the changes in pageantry; and secondly, experienced masters, who adapted with the times. Matthew Anderson demonstrates the first. His father, also Matthew Anderson, was the 'Policeman-poet of Ayrshire', a man inspired by local history and culture – passions he passed onto his son.<sup>70</sup> The younger Anderson started as a junior reporter for the *Southern Reporter* in the Scottish borders just before the outbreak of World War I. Promoted to editor at the age of 19, he wrote leaders on both foreign policy and local government.<sup>71</sup> After the Armistice, he took an editorial position at the *Manchester Guardian*, and became involved in civic publicity.<sup>72</sup> In 1925, Anderson authored the Manchester City Council's first annual publicity handbook, *How Manchester Is Managed*.<sup>73</sup> Anderson's work in Manchester brought him to the attention of the Liverpool Organization, where he became the director of publicity in 1926, reinventing himself as a 'publicity expert'.<sup>74</sup> Through his journalism career and writing about local government, Anderson became professionally entwined with urban boosterism.

Anderson also inherited the creative flair of his father. He wrote poems and short stories, and was involved in the 'resuscitation' of the Repertory Theatre in Manchester.<sup>75</sup> Pageants, with their romanticized and poetic evocation of the past, and their economic usefulness in the present, were a logical next step. Anderson first mastered a pageant in 1926, with the theatrical director Edward P. Genn, for the opening ceremony of the Liverpool Civic Week. Performed only once, it was small and mostly processional, ending on the steps of the Town Hall, and depicted events of civic importance, such as the granting of charters.<sup>76</sup> In 1930, Anderson and Genn produced a larger Pageant of Transport, involving 3,500 amateur

<sup>69</sup> L.N. Parker, *Several of My Lives* (London, 1928), 297–8.

<sup>70</sup> D.L. Reid, *Discovering Matthew Anderson: Policeman-Poet of Ayrshire* (Beith, 2009), 6–7.

<sup>71</sup> 'Former Duns journalist's appointment', *Berwickshire News and General Advertiser*, 9 Mar. 1926, 8.

<sup>72</sup> *Southern Reporter*, 4 Mar. 1926, 4. In 1925, the *Guardian* published the *Manchester Guardian Year Book* (Manchester, 1925), which explained and promoted local government.

<sup>73</sup> M. Anderson (ed.), *How Manchester Is Managed: A Record of Municipal Activity* (Manchester, 1925), 2.

<sup>74</sup> 'Publicity expert', *Southern Reporter*, 11 Nov. 1926, 4.

<sup>75</sup> 'Former Duns journalist's appointment'.

<sup>76</sup> 'Liverpool's Civic Week', *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 15 Oct. 1926, 10.



**Figure 1:** Children dressed as buds of cotton during the opening scene of the Lancashire Cotton Pageant 1932. British Pathé, Film ID: 679.12.

performers, commemorating the centenary of the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester Railway.<sup>77</sup> In 1932, Anderson hit the 'big-time' with the Lancashire Cotton Pageant, and truly began using pageantry to put the ideals of civic publicity into practice.<sup>78</sup> Performed 16 times in Manchester's Belle Vue gardens, the pageant had a cast of 12,000, and attracted crowds totalling 200,000. The pageant was organized by the Joint Committee of Cotton Trades' Organizations, the Lancashire Industrial Development Council and the Manchester Development Committee, and was also supported by mayors and councillors from surrounding towns and cities, such as Liverpool, Stockport and Oldham.<sup>79</sup> The narrative created a both allegorical (see [Figure 1](#)) and literal story of cotton, with scenes such as Cotton in Ancient Times, The Age of Inventions (featuring inventors such as John Kay, with his flying-shuttle) and Lancashire at Work (depicting the working-life of the mill operative).<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> 'Liverpool puts on bunting', *Manchester Guardian*, 11 Sep. 1930, 13; and 'Rail centenary pageant', *Manchester Guardian*, 29 Aug. 1930, 11.

<sup>78</sup> M. Anderson, *The Lancashire Cotton Pageant* (Manchester, 1932).

<sup>79</sup> 'Lancashire Cotton Pageant', *Manchester Guardian*, 8 Jun. 1932, 11.

<sup>80</sup> These scenes were interwoven with moments of more contentious history, such as the massacre of Peterloo in 1819. 'Cotton Pageant "Book"', *Manchester Guardian*, 28 Nov. 1931, 14. Anderson had working-class sympathies; in 1934, with Genn and the communist

The Cotton Pageant was a response to fears about industrial decline following growing foreign competition, tariffs and perceived taxation burdens. Fred Mills, an industrialist on the Joint Committee of Cotton Trade Organizations, publicly acknowledged that many were talking down the industry as if it were 'a spent force'.<sup>81</sup> When Ellis Green, the lord mayor of Manchester, opened the pageant, he said that 'behind all this showmanship was the underlying thought that Lancashire's great cotton industry must be advertised, and advertised flamboyantly, vociferously... The industry must "bang the drum", and bang it hard.'<sup>82</sup> The bombastic final episode thus portrayed Lancashire Cotton for the World, and showed King Cotton, seated on a modern car and drawn into the arena by hundreds of children. Mannequins followed the car before peoples of the world, robed in Lancashire fabrics, also entered.<sup>83</sup> By illustrating the history of cotton in earlier periods, and indeed across the world, Lancashire's civic identity was thus bolstered by a sense of inheritance and permanency. As Anderson also pointed out in *Civic Progress and Publicity* in the same year, pageants not only stimulated civic pride in this way, but also gave a continuous flow of free press references that demonstrated the industrial advantages of the city.<sup>84</sup> Accordingly, then, it was in the period of the Depression that pageantry reached its height, and in the cities that were most affected (see Table 1).

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, some of the earlier generation of pageant-masters adapted and also made themselves available to local governments and industrialists hoping to stage pageants. Frank Lascelles typifies this development. Born in the village of Sibford Gower as Frank William Thomas Stevens in 1875, and son of the village vicar, he transformed himself into Lascelles: lord of the manor and internationally acclaimed pageant-master.<sup>85</sup> Lascelles was a master of reinvention not only in his personal but his professional life as well. His first pageant was staged at Oxford in 1907 during the height of pageant-fever.<sup>86</sup> But his fame came from the imperial pageants he staged in Quebec (1908), Cape Town (1909), London (1911) and Calcutta (1912). Capping these events was the Pageant of Empire (1924) at the British Empire Exhibition, earning Lascelles the title 'the Man Who Staged the Empire'. Following the spread of Civic

composer Alan Bush, he scripted the indoor Pageant of Labour – designed to recruit young people to the union movement. C. Chambers (ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre* (London, 2002), 580.

<sup>81</sup> 'The Cotton Pageant', *Manchester Guardian*, 17 Jun. 1932, 13.

<sup>82</sup> 'The pageant opens', *Manchester Guardian*, 27 Jun. 1932, 11.

<sup>83</sup> Anderson, *The Lancashire Cotton Pageant*.

<sup>84</sup> M. Anderson, 'The importance of pageants in community advertising schemes', *Civic Progress and Publicity*, 1 (1932), 10–12.

<sup>85</sup> Deborah S. Ryan provides an excellent description of Lascelles transformation: D.S. Ryan, 'The Man Who Staged the Empire: remembering Frank Lascelles in Sibford Gower, 1875–2000', in M. Kwint, C. Breward and J. Aynsley (eds.), *Material Memories* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>86</sup> D.S. Ryan, "'Pageantitis': Frank Lascelles' 1907 Oxford Historical Pageant, visual spectacle and popular memory', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 8 (2007), 63–82.



Table 1: *Historical pageants in major English cities<sup>a</sup> during the Great Depression, 1929–1932*

Pageant	Total attendance	No. of performers	Profit (£)	Profit (£) adjusted for 2005 value <sup>b</sup>
The Stoke-on-Trent Historical Pageant (1930)	25,000–40,000 <sup>c</sup>	5,000	4,776	159,613
The Salford Historical Pageant (1930)	40,000–50,000 <sup>d</sup>	6,000	1,650	55,143
The Historical Pageant of Newcastle and the North (1931)	120,000	6,000	c. 3,000	100,260
The Pageant of Leicester (1932)	118,815	6,000	2,402	80,274
The Historical Pageant of Bradford (1931)	100,000	7,500	c. 4,000–5,000	c. 133,680–167,100
The Lancashire Cotton Pageant (Manchester, 1932)	200,000	12,000		

<sup>a</sup>Cities in the top 20 by population size, according to the 1921 Census. See '1921 Census of England and Wales, General Report with Appendices, Table 13: POPULATION, 1901–21', *Vision of Britain*. Accessed online 7 Jul. 2015 at [www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table\\_page.jsp?tab\\_id=EW1921GEN\\_M13](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table_page.jsp?tab_id=EW1921GEN_M13).

<sup>b</sup>Calculated using the National Archives Currency Converter tool, which is 'intended to be a general guide to historic values, rather than a categorical statement of fact', National Archives. Accessed online 8 Jul. 2015 at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/disclaimer.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/disclaimer.htm).

<sup>c</sup>Exact figures have not been ascertained. The *Evening Sentinel* reported that 'Not fewer than 150,000 persons witnessed the Pageant and the other exhibitions during the week, it is officially estimated.' It seems likely that this meant total pageant audience *plus* other events. There were 12 performances, and the first was seen by 4,000. With the pageant's financial success it seems likely that at least 25,000–40,000 saw the pageant. *Evening Sentinel*, 19 May 1930, p. 1; *Evening Sentinel*, 26 May 1930, p. 5.

<sup>d</sup>Exact figures have not been ascertained. Between 7,000 and 8,000 attended the first performance, and 11,000 attended an extra final performance put on due to demand. If the momentum of the first was maintained, plus the final, there would have been approximately 53,000; as a conservative estimate, it seems likely that at least 40,000–50,000 saw the pageant. *Manchester Guardian*, 7 Jul. 1930, p. 13; *Manchester Guardian*, 8 Jul. 1930, p. 6.

#### Sources

Manchester: *Manchester Guardian*, 11 Jul. 1932, p. 11; *Manchester Guardian*, 4 Jun. 1932, p. 15. Bradford: *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 9 Jul. 1931, p. 1; *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 22 Jul. 1931, p. 12; *Manchester Guardian*, 29 Dec. 1931, p. 5. Stoke-on-Trent: *Evening Sentinel*, 19 May 1930, p. 1; *Evening Sentinel*, 26 May 1930, p. 5; *Lancashire Evening Post*, 31 Jul. 1930, p. 4. Leicester: 'Leicester Pageant', *Times*, 15 Jun. 1932, p. 8; *Leicester Mercury*, 18 Jun. 1932, accessed online at [www.leicestermercury.co.uk/Leicester-Pageant-proved-great-glorious-adventure/story-16401875-detail/story.html](http://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/Leicester-Pageant-proved-great-glorious-adventure/story-16401875-detail/story.html), 7 Jul. 2015; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 6 Feb. 1933, p. 5. Salford: *Manchester Guardian*, 7 Jul. 1930, p. 13; *Manchester Guardian*, 8 Jul. 1930, p. 6; *Lancashire Evening Post*, 8 Jan. 1931, p. 2. Newcastle: *Hartlepool Mail*, Tuesday 28 Jul. 1931, *Manchester Guardian*, 17 Jul. 1931, p. 15; *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 12 Oct. 1931, p. 2.

Weeks and historical pageantry to industrial centres, Lascelles caught on quickly. Despite having been inspired by Louis Napoleon Parker's Warwick Pageant in 1906, his inter-war productions met the demands of urban pageantry in both style and content.<sup>87</sup>

As Mick Wallis has pointed out, pageants mobilized 'a vague sense of history' to offer a distraction from 'anxiety and anomie' and to provide 'a sense of continuity and depth'.<sup>88</sup> Though Britain was not experiencing the same extent of tensions and upheaval as continental Europe, nor the same levels of unemployment, the proximity of these issues added to the quest for stability.<sup>89</sup> Civic figures thus lauded how pageantry bonded the city. In Leicester, where Lascelles staged a pageant in 1932, the mayor argued that the event would create a 'more cheerful faith in our future' by encouraging locals to see 'the early struggles and vicissitudes of fortune through which our City has been built from a tiny hamlet'. Encouraged by their 'forefathers, who won through against such tremendous odds', citizens would 'be inspired to go forward with renewed courage' to make the city 'worthy of its past achievements'.<sup>90</sup> Yet, as the mayor also told the *Observer*, the city was keen to maintain its 'record as a prosperous industrial centre'.<sup>91</sup> This dual aim, of connecting history to present-day industrial growth and civic pride, was aptly illustrated on the front-cover of the script – where a small image representing the history covered by the pageant was surrounded with symbols of contemporary industrial and agricultural production (see [Figure 2](#)).

Pageants also complemented other boosterist activities. Industrial exhibitions and fairs accompanied and worked in tandem with all of Lascelles' pageants in this period. In Barking, where Lascelles staged a pageant in 1931, the pageant souvenir described the advantages of Barking for industrial development, and the pageant was accompanied by a large industrial exhibition which showed what was already being done.<sup>92</sup> Barking got its idea for a pageant directly from Bradford's pageant after a civic party witnessed the Lascelles-effect in action.<sup>93</sup> Raymond Derwent, general manager of the *Yorkshire Observer*, declared that Bradford

<sup>87</sup> Ryan, 'The Man Who Staged the Empire', 168.

<sup>88</sup> M. Wallis, 'Delving at the levels of memory and dressing up in the past', in C. Barker and M.B. Gale (eds.), *British Theatre between the Wars, 1918–1938* (Cambridge, 2000), 200.

<sup>89</sup> The Association for Education in Citizenship, for example, was formed by the politician, industrialist and philanthropist E.D. Simon due to his belief that the young needed to be guided away from the temptations of fascism. See G. Whitmarsh, 'The politics of political education: an episode', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 6 (1974), 133–42. As Richard Overy has argued, there was a general sense of a crisis of civilization felt in Britain despite the 'absence of serious threat or profound discontinuities'. R. Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars* (London, 2009), 7.

<sup>90</sup> W.E. Wilford, 'The pageant of Leicester', *The Historical Pageant of Leicestershire: Official Souvenir* (Leicester, 1932), 3.

<sup>91</sup> 'Pageantry in the Midlands', *Observer*, 29 May 1932, 8.

<sup>92</sup> B. Lawrence, 'Industries', in *The Book of Barking: Being a Souvenir of the Charter Celebrations, Historical Pageant, and Industrial Exhibition* (London, 1931).

<sup>93</sup> 'Fishing village to borough', *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 3 Sep. 1931, 5.



**Figure 2:** (Colour online) *Pageant of Leicester: Text of the Episodes* (Leicester, 1932). Book out of copyright and in possession of author.

had never had a more effective advertisement for its products. Journalists, attracted by the performance, then gave publicity to the city's industrial products because 'the spectacle was so cleverly linked up with the

city's staple trade'.<sup>94</sup> Derwent's point here is particularly instructive, and hints at how Lascelles had made his style of pageantry relevant to industrial cities. Stoke-on-Trent's 1930 pageant, commemorating the bicentenary of the birth of Josiah Wedgwood, provides an example. The episodes unfolded a Whiggish history of 'the development of a one-time insignificant spot' to 'one of the most famous industrial centres of the world'.<sup>95</sup> Early scenes were staples of historical pageantry: Romans; local heroes; the pomp of medieval Britain; and the dissolution of the Abbey during Henry VIII's reign. But the story of pottery in Staffordshire was also weaved in. In the fifth episode, 'pioneer peasant potters' of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were portrayed. The sixth episode showed the life of Josiah Wedgwood through a daydream of the 'hero' from his humble apprentice beginnings to his election as a fellow of the Royal Society.<sup>96</sup> The eighth episode returned to pottery, with an 'allegorical portrayal of the Modern Potteries Industries', featuring women dressed as pottery (Figure 3), and a Ceramic Queen and King Coal, 'typifying the Metallurgical Industries of the locality'.<sup>97</sup> As the city struggled with higher-than-average unemployment, the pageant attempted to provide a sense of pride and hope by referring to the development of the industries that had made it famous. But, in doing this, it did not ignore the proud civic base of the city's history; these earlier stories served to cement the idea that the modern city was the inheritor of a long history, as the home of not just locally but nationally important events and people, too. In the final scene (see Figure 4), all performers from the 5,000 strong cast marched into the centre of the arena and stood in front of the grandstand: the civic community of history presenting itself to the civic community of the present.

Lascelles had successfully adapted to the priorities of civic and business elites by creating bright colourful pageants that were low on moralizing and high on spectacle. He directed 18 pageants between 1907 and 1934, 7 of which came in a flurry between 1928 and 1932, as he tried to escape the mounting debts of his extravagant lifestyle.<sup>98</sup> Deborah Ryan has written that Lascelles' urban pageants in the late 1920s and 1930s would have been a 'come down' after the 'heady triumphs' of his imperial pageants, which were seen by hundreds of thousands of people.<sup>99</sup> This may be so, but his pageants were still incredibly popular in the cities in which they were staged. If he had been a younger and healthier man, Lascelles would

<sup>94</sup> R. Derwent, 'History, art and commerce', in *Frank Lascelles: Our Modern Orpheus* (Oxford, 1932), 147.

<sup>95</sup> 'Pageants and the people', in *Stoke-On-Trent Historical Pageant, Military Tattoo, Pottery Exhibition* (Stoke-on-Trent, 1930), 5.

<sup>96</sup> 10 of Josiah Wedgwood's descendants took part in the episode. 'Stoke Pageant', *Manchester Guardian*, 19 May 1930, 16.

<sup>97</sup> Description of pageant taken from *Stoke-on-Trent Historical Pageant and the Josiah Wedgwood Bicentenary Celebrations: Book of Words* (Stoke-on-Trent, 1930).

<sup>98</sup> Ryan, 'The Man Who Staged the Empire', 177.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.



**Figure 3:** Women dressed as pottery during the Stoke-on-Trent Historical Pageant (1930). Staffordshire Museum Service, FP.76.41.10397 (37/22176).



**Figure 4:** The performers and audience of the Stoke-on-Trent Historical Pageant (1930). Staffordshire Museum Service, FP.76.41.10412 (37/22189).



probably have continued to dominate urban historical pageantry. But his health and financial problems caught up with him, and he died penniless in a Brighton boarding house in 1934.<sup>100</sup> Anderson, in contrast, continued to stage pageants and grow in stature in the world of industrial and civic publicity; by 1938, he was the general manager of the Yorkshire Evening News and its associated titles, as well as a director of the Coal Utilization Council.<sup>101</sup>

### Conclusion

Only a small portion of the urban pageants and pageant-masters of the 1920s and 1930s have been mentioned in this article. During the Depression, there were also large pageants in Salford (1930) and Newcastle (1931), and, later, large-scale pageants in Nottingham (1935), Manchester (1938) and Birmingham (1938). Historical pageants were an adaptable and enduringly popular form of inter-war urban culture. At a basic level, audience appreciation can be seen from the huge turnouts that many pageants gained. Press reports abounded with descriptions of enthusiastic reception from the grandstands, but also of the moments of respect – such as the respectful removal of hats during funeral scenes.<sup>102</sup> Certainly, it is still difficult to judge the motivations of pageanteers – especially at the level of the general performer, who made up the majority of the cast but lacked a public mouthpiece. Pageants, at least at the civic level, were undoubtedly organized and orchestrated by a middle-class dominated civic culture.<sup>103</sup> Following this, class lines were reinforced rather than challenged, and the image of the civic presented was one defined by institutions and their representatives rather than 'the people' who performed.<sup>104</sup> But, from the numbers and free time they gave, working-class urban-dwellers certainly seemed happy to gather under a banner of civic identity. Pageant organizers, too, were aware that they depended on the support of all levels of society, and were accordingly sometimes willing to alter scenes if faced

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>101</sup> 'Birmingham fair', *Manchester Guardian*, 18 Feb. 1933, 16.

<sup>102</sup> Such as during Nelson's funeral in the Greenwich Night Pageant (1933). 'Greenwich Pageant', *Times*, 23 Jun. 1933, 12.

<sup>103</sup> See Woods, 'Performing power', 62–3, for a breakdown of the key organizers in the pageant.

<sup>104</sup> Historians, such as Wallis and Woods, have seen this mobilizing as conservative attempts to maintain existing power structures. More recently, however, Readman and Freeman have pointed out that pageants also achieved objectives that did not necessarily involve hegemonic control. Wallis and Ryan have also argued that, whatever the aims of the organizers, pageanteers could still take away their own meanings – or could simply take part for the fun of it. See Wallis, 'The Popular Front pageant'; Woods, 'Performing power'; Readman, 'The place of the past'; Freeman, "'Splendid display'"; and D.S. Ryan, 'Staging the imperial city: the Pageant of London, 1911', in F. Driver and D. Gilbert (eds.), *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity* (Manchester, 1999).



with protest.<sup>105</sup> Civic culture, led predominately by local government and including associations and private industry, was ambitious and adaptive, and, to an extent, also inclusive. Pageants are a testament to this ethos and success.

In some respects, the 1930s were the apotheosis of the municipal civic publicity movement. Local governments did continue to advertise and stage exhibitions afterwards,<sup>106</sup> but, from the 1940s, locally organized promotional activity was superseded by nationally based industrial policy. The central Board of Trade now usually set the parameters of regional policy.<sup>107</sup> Public relations, more generally, moved away from local government and public service towards a more centralized or commercial alignment.<sup>108</sup> Despite local government officers being the 'driving force' in the forming of the Institute of Public Relations in 1948, their sense of public interest seemingly came into conflict with those who saw their clients or employers as the top priority.<sup>109</sup> Correspondingly, urban pageants also declined. Socio-economic and cultural changes that were apparent in the inter-war period grew stronger in the post-war years. Extensive suburbanization and the rise of central government in the 1940s–1960s, for example, led to a loss of local government power, as the old systems of municipal government were 'recast' into 'a structure that, as its proponents thought, fitted a commuting rather than community-based generation'.<sup>110</sup> Civic elites and local politicians, vital characters in the production of pageants, found their control waning as central government grew.<sup>111</sup> Following World War II, historical pageantry, with a few exceptions, thus mostly returned to its Edwardian roots: smaller rural towns.<sup>112</sup>

<sup>105</sup> For example, the producers of the Manchester Pageant in 1938 at first had had no intention of portraying the bloody massacre of Peterloo (1819), likely, as the *Manchester Guardian* reported, the event was still too recent to be retold without causing ill-feeling – especially in the context of a decade of mass working-class urban protests. But, after protests by the trade unions and the Manchester and Salford District of the Communist Party, the organizers relented and included a short scene as part of a tableau. 'Peterloo for Manchester Pageant', *Manchester Guardian*, 13 Apr. 1938, 11; *Manchester Historical Pageant* (Manchester, 1938), 85.

<sup>106</sup> City councils continued to promote their work, now through the Institute of Public Relations, formed in 1948. L'Étang, *Public Relations in Britain*, 63–5.

<sup>107</sup> Ward, 'Time and place', 64.

<sup>108</sup> L'Étang, *Public Relations in Britain*, 98. See, for example, the new Central Office of Information films (from 1946).

<sup>109</sup> J. Brown, P. Gaudin and W. Moran, *PR and Communication in Local Government and Public Services* (London, 2013), 4.

<sup>110</sup> J.A. Chandler, *Explaining Local Government: Local Government in Britain since 1800* (Manchester, 2007), 184.

<sup>111</sup> P. Shapely, 'Governance in the post-war city: historical reflections on public-private partnerships in the UK', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 37 (2012), 2.

<sup>112</sup> As Mark Freeman has shown, there was a new outbreak of 'pageant fever' in the post-war period, especially in the early to mid-1950s. But, apart from Nottingham in 1949, these pageants were back in smaller places, such as Warwick (1953), St Albans (1953) and Bury St Edmunds (1959). Freeman, "'Splendid display'", 439–40.

The decline of the large-scale pageant should not, however, necessarily be seen as the end of the ethos that had driven it. In some respects, public taste had simply changed. The growth of television in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, and its associated 'mobile privatisation', was one factor.<sup>113</sup> Christopher Ede, a famous pageant-master, explained in 1957 that he had already changed his own pageant-style to short snappy episodes because a public brought up on the cinema and television could 'scarcely bear to look at one incident for much more than ten minutes'.<sup>114</sup> After 1959, Ede stopped directing pageants altogether. Instead of the historical pageant, he pioneered less expensive and time-consuming light and sound entertainments ('son et lumière') for civic events.<sup>115</sup> The smaller and cheaper community play, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, also served a similar purpose to pageants, by focusing on community consciousness, and relying on professional producers supervising local amateur actors.<sup>116</sup> More generally, voluntary public performance and spectacle has remained important to the economic and civic culture of towns, cities and the nation throughout the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>117</sup> With Danny Boyle's Olympic opening ceremony in 2012, a historical pageant of sorts, the genre's influence has lived on.<sup>118</sup>

Writing the full history of the post-war decline or adaptation of historical pageantry is a task that remains. But the inter-war period, and the 1930s in particular, should be acknowledged as another golden era after the initial Edwardian outburst. Urban governments especially, attuned to the needs of publicity in a time of economic crisis and potential social dislocation, turned to pageantry to mitigate against the effects of both. In terms of attendance, press/public opinion and profit, these pageants were a consistent success – though, of course, they could never overturn or reverse the severe structural deficiencies that were causing industrial decline in some parts of Britain. But they were just as much about providing a sense of stability and fun in turbulent times, looking back to local history

<sup>113</sup> Freeman, "'Splendid display'", 454, drawing on R. Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London, 1974).

<sup>114</sup> 'Borough frowned upon its "creckett" pioneer', *Manchester Guardian*, 8 May 1957, 7.

<sup>115</sup> Son et Lumière was first presented at Chambord, France, in 1952, devised by M. Paul Robert-Houdin. See *The Pageant of Buxton in Light and Sound* (London, 1958) for Ede's version, and 'Obituary: Christopher Ede', *The Stage*, 25 Feb. 1988, 29, for a career overview.

<sup>116</sup> N. Beddow, *Turning Points: The Impact of Participation in Community Theatre*, ed. M. Schwartz (Bristol, 2001), 10.

<sup>117</sup> Usually consisting of float parades made up of local people and businesses, carnivals offer a similar voluntarism/boosterism. National events – such as the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012 – also continue to provide opportunities for events orientated towards local culture and economy.

<sup>118</sup> 'London 2012 Olympics: Danny Boyle's "once in a lifetime" opening ceremony wows audience', *Telegraph*, 28 Jul. 2012. Accessed online 12 Oct. 2015 at [www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/olympicsvideo/9434262/London-2012-Olympics-Danny-Boyles-once-in-a-lifetime-opening-ceremony-wows-audience.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/olympicsvideo/9434262/London-2012-Olympics-Danny-Boyles-once-in-a-lifetime-opening-ceremony-wows-audience.html).

for lessons and comfort in the present. New and old pageant-masters responded to cultural changes, and created a more spectacular and socially inclusive narrative. The depiction of history may have thus lost some of the historical accuracy that had been prevalent before World War I, but pageantry's ability to pull in huge crowds of both performers and spectators, all in the name of civic publicity, was unrivalled.